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FACT SHEET

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Programs for Self-Represented Litigants

California's courts are facing an ever-increasing number of litigants who go to court without legal counsel, largely because they cannot afford representation. Self-represented litigants typically are unfamiliar with court procedures and forms as well as with their rights and obligations, which leaves them disadvantaged in court and consumes significant court resources. Accordingly, the Judicial Council has made access to the courts for self-represented litigants one of its top priorities. The council is directly involved with the following programs and services.

Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants

The Judicial Council established the Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants in 2001 to coordinate the statewide response to the needs of litigants who represent themselves in court. The task force drafted a statewide action plan to serve self-represented litigants that was based in large part on local courts' own plans to add programs and services for self-represented litigants.

Web Site

On January 1, 2003, the Judicial Council launched an updated version of its comprehensive online Self-Help Center for court users who do not have attorneys and for others wishing to become better informed about the law and court procedures. The entire site was translated into Spanish and became available on August 1, 2003. This link to the courts helps achieve the council's goal of ensuring meaningful court access for all Californians. The Web site is designed to help its users navigate the court system and acquire realistic expectations about the legal system. Although it contains a wealth of legal information and resources, this site does not interpret the law, predict results, or give legal advice on individual cases. (See the companion fact sheet "Online Self-Help Center Q&A.") The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the council's staff agency, maintains the center at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp/.

Family Law Facilitators

Effective January 1, 1997, Family Code section 10002 established an Office of the Family Law Facilitator in each of the 58 counties. The Judicial Council administers the program, providing more than \$11 million per year to court-based offices that are staffed by licensed attorneys. These facilitators, working for the superior court, guide litigants through procedures related to child support, maintenance of health insurance, and spousal support. They assist with cases involving the local child support agency, many of which are public assistance reimbursement cases. In addition, many courts enlist volunteer attorneys or provide funding that enables facilitators to assist self-represented litigants in other family law areas, including divorce, custody, and visitation. Family law facilitators can assist parties with forms, court procedures, and support calculations, and they provide workshops and referrals to community agencies that assist parents and families. Statewide, facilitators help more than 30,000 self-represented litigants each month.

Equal Access Fund

The Judicial Council is working in partnership with the State Bar's Legal Services Trust Fund Commission to establish self-help centers in California courts. To that end, each year the council and the bar distribute nearly \$1 million to legal services programs for court-based services for low-income self-represented litigants. Eighteen programs have been started in California courts to assist litigants in cases involving domestic violence, guardianships, family law, landlords and tenants, and general civil assistance.

Family Law Information Centers

Effective January 1, 1998, Family Code section 15010 established a Family Law Information Center pilot project. The Judicial Council administers three pilot project centers in the Superior Courts of Los Angeles, Sutter, and Fresno Counties. The centers are supervised by attorneys and assist low-income self-represented litigants with forms, information, and resources concerning divorce, separation, parentage, child and spousal support, property division, and custody and visitation. The center staffs work closely with the family law facilitators in these three counties to coordinate services. An evaluation of the effectiveness of the centers, issued on March 1, 2003, demonstrated that the customers and judges were very happy with the services, and that more than 45,000 litigants were assisted each year.

Model Self-Help Centers

Five model self-help centers were created in 2002 to pilot new methods of providing services. These five programs—Spanish-speaking, multilingual, technology, urban

collaboration, and regional coordination—will provide translated materials and technological solutions as well as serve as models for replication in other counties.

Planning Grants and Implementation Funds

To assist local courts in determining the needs of the self-represented litigants in their communities, developing partnerships in the communities, and establishing appropriate programs, the Judicial Council has encouraged every court to develop an action plan for serving self-represented litigants. Funding was provided to 52 courts to develop such plans, and for the courts that did develop them, additional funds were provided for implementation. Actions described in the plans included those establishing self-help centers, developing additional information on local Web sites, using computer programs to assist litigants in completing court forms, and reaching out to the community by training volunteers from varied ethnic backgrounds in how to assist self-represented litigants.

Videos

The AOC offers several videos to help the estimated 94,500 self-represented litigants involved in custody mediation each year learn more about family court procedures. The award-winning *Focus on the Child* orients self-represented parents to court procedures, mediation, child custody evaluation, effective presentation of child-related information to the courts, parenting plans, and supervised visitation. The AOC also has developed videos on requesting a domestic violence restraining order and responding to a request for a domestic violence restraining order; these are available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean. Additional videos describe how to prepare court forms for an uncontested divorce and how to prepare for a family law hearing; they are available in English and Spanish. A list of videos prepared by local courts is available from the AOC.

Publications for Self-Represented Litigants

The AOC develops and distributes a wide variety of materials for self-represented litigants. These include:

- *Summary Dissolution Handbook*: a set of detailed instructions for completing forms for a summary dissolution and writing a marital settlement agreement for cases involving a summary dissolution.
- *Caregivers in the Courts*: A booklet for foster parents on how the juvenile court process works and how to present information on the needs of children in their care.
- *Adoption Information*: A handout on preparing adoption forms.
- *Emancipation Pamphlet*: A guide to the emancipation process for minors.

Education and Training

Enabling court staffs to effectively assist self-represented litigants is a key part of the Judicial Council's mission to make the courts more accessible.

- In the spring of 2001, the council sponsored four regional conferences where courts discussed alternative models for providing self-help services and determined how to best meet the needs of self-represented litigants in their communities.
- The AOC's Education Division/Center for Judicial Education and Research addresses issues that concern self-represented litigants in many of its classes and seminars, including satellite broadcast sessions for court clerks on the difference between legal information and legal advice.
- The AOC sponsors an annual conference on domestic violence that informs and trains advocates, law enforcement officers, and judicial officers on up-to-date assistance models.
- The council's Civil and Small Claims Advisory Committee prepared a training videotape for small claims bench officers on fair and impartial adjudication of small claims cases (all of which proceed without attorney involvement). That committee also is developing a model program for recruiting, selecting, and evaluating temporary judges for small claims courts.